

# NOTES ON THE CHESTNUT-SHOULDERED WRENS

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Recently the known range of the Blue-breasted Wren (*Malurus pulcherrimus*) has been considerably extended; northwards to the mouth of the Murehison River as a result of Dr. D. L. Serventy's identification of the species in that area in 1943, and, in effect, southwards to the vicinity of Perth on Mr. L. J. McHugh's discovery of it at Scarborough in the same year.

That the birds observed by Mr. McHugh amongst the dunes at Scarborough were Blue-breasted Wrens can be accepted since the writer found this species established on the coast in the vicinity of the Moore River in 1947, and present in the dunes at Yanehep on December 25, 1949.

In common with the Blue-and-white Wren (*Malurus leucnotus*) it is evidently fairly plentiful at points all along a section of the coast from Perth northwards. Both these species are strongly established in the Moore River area, and that they are not un plentiful at Yanehep was indicated when a large family-party of each came under observation during a visit to that locality of little more than an hour's duration on the date mentioned. I can think of no reason why they should not occur in the coastal country south of Perth.

Until comparatively recent years neither of these wrens had been recorded in the Perth district, and it is evident that they have not consistently been as well represented as they are at present. It would appear that either they have penetrated southward along the coast during the last few decades, or, though present throughout have previously existed at very low population level over a long period. Everything considered, the latter appears to me to be the more rational view. But whatever may have been their history in this region, with their addition no less than four species of *Malurus* are represented in the district, I think a particularly rich accumulation for any such area. All four species were met with on the coastal plain in the Moore River-Gingin Brook area in 1947, and subsequently.

During our 1947 visits to the Moore River in May and October, my wife and I found the Blue-breasted Wren established in the scrubby hollows and thickets behind the dunes, from which strongholds it moved out to hunt amongst the tracts of low scrub, and over the limestone ridges immediately adjacent to them. It also inhabited the dunes, extending its activities to the outermost bushes along the shoreline. It occupied these situations in common with the Blue-and-white Wren, but was not found far out in the low scrub landward of the thickets, which, on the whole the latter species favoured. Amongst the taller scrub clothing the southern bank of the river, however, it was present for a distance of two miles upstream, in which situation it came into contact with family-parties of the Splendid Blue Wren (*Malurus splendens*).

In 1948 much of its habitat on the southern side of the river had been burnt out, and, during a short visit, considerably less was seen of the species. Nevertheless one family-party was tending very young birds.

In all this area the species was wild, particularly the full-plumaged males, and it was only by perseverance that we obtained good views of them. Apart from the marked dissimilarity in the colour of the back, and of the head with the exception of the cheek patches, from males of the Red-winged Wren (*Malurus elegans*) we believed we could detect in these males minor modifications of plumage, in shorter chestnut shoulder patches, and less extensive breast coloration; small differences that nevertheless imparted a distinctive character.

At variance with the wildness of the Moore River birds, and, in this particular, typical of the different behaviour of individuals of a species, two bright males with the family-party seen at Yanchep recently came up very close to us, within a foot or two. One of these was in perfect plumage, and when it faced the sun, the blue-violet of the breast was unmistakable. The back was purple, and the admixture of colours on the crown gave the impression of an overlying greyness.

The few males in grey and brown plumage met with amongst the family-parties were of immense interest, the two phases noted being very distinct. The birds of one of these were in plain grey, tail uncertain, bill black, there being no distinctive marking whatever about the eye or on the lores. It was thought that these very plain, distinctively grey males with a black bill might be adults in eclipse plumage. Two were seen in the Moore River area in May and one at Yanchep in December. Birds of the other phase were brown with tail blue, and with black appearing around the eye in marked contrast with an orange-brown bill. Two were seen, one at Cape Leschenault a few miles north of the Moore River in May, and one in the river area in October. From the bill coloration we considered these birds to be immature, and if eclipse plumage is unadorned grey as earlier suggested, it would appear that this striking and very distinctive apparel bears the special insignia of young males in transition plumage.

A bird answering to this description (with bill chestnut) was observed by Mr. Eric H. Sedgwick during the Lower Murchison R.A.O.U. camp in September 1948, and recorded by him provisionally under *Malurus splendens* (see *The Emu*, vol. 48, 1949, p. 235). This phase is quite alien to the orderly sequence of plumage changes in *M. splendens* and the bird in question could very well have been assignable to *M. pulcherrimus*. However, Mr. Ken Buller has taken the Variegated Wren (*M. lamberti*) in the Murchison River locality since the time of the R.A.O.U. camp (*The Emu*, vol. 49, 1950, p. 49, and *W.A. Naturalist*, vol. 2, 1950, p. 83) and as there may or may not be some parallel in the plumage-phases of that species and *M. pulcherrimus* the identity of the bird under

consideration remains uncertain. Brown-phase males of *M. elegans*, with bill and lores black are met with, but in this species also the story of the plumage changes remains untold.

Generally speaking, females, with which, unavoidably, indistinguishable juveniles become included, far outnumber recognisable males in this genus, and we found the Blue-breasted Wren no exception to the rule. Our field description of the females of this species, in which the observable differences from females of *M. elegans* were noted, is as follows: Plain brown birds, lacking the chestnut tinge on wings and mantle noticeable in *elegans*. A distinct greyishness on the sides of the neck. Tail appearing shorter than in *elegans* and having a brighter, greenish tinge, but this variable as some blue tails were noted. Bill orange-brown, instead of very dark brown to dull black. Lores light chestnut instead of burnt sienna. A ring of colour similar to that of the lores, but darker, surrounding the eye, this being conspicuous in the field, and at once distinguishing the females of this species from those of *M. elegans*, in which the eye-ring is completely lacking.

Apart from a number of small notes resembling those of other species, and used by members of a family-party largely for the purpose of keeping in touch (notes which better ears than mine could pick up at a considerable distance), we heard little from these birds. Once only, when we came suddenly upon a bird in the scrub, did we hear a warning "strit" resembling that used commonly by both the Splendid Blue and Red-winged Wrens for the same purpose. Subsequently a warbled song, not a little resembling that of the Splendid Blue Wren, was heard in the areas occupied by the birds, but we could not with certainty attribute it to them.

Although we did not find the Red-winged Wren in the thick scrub bordering the lower reaches of the Moore River, a search along a short section of the Gingin Brook further inland in May 1947, revealed, to our surprise and delight, a full normal population. Two family-parties and a pair were seen in closely adjacent territories. The pair and the larger of the family-parties were here occupying fairly open and partly cleared brookside territories, but a background of extensive thickly grown swampland no doubt accounted for the undiminished numbers of the birds in this particular area. Dr. Serventy saw several males when we made a lunch-time halt at the same spot in October 1948.

Recently we found family-parties of this wren present along the brooks of Araluen, to all appearances unperturbed by the comings and goings of innumerable visitors. In the South-west it continues to hold its own along at least some parts of the Margaret River; and in the neighbourhood of the Caves Road Bridge some of the birds habitually present themselves in my sister's garden. Its ability to survive in these situations is encouraging, but in the Bickley-Piesse Brook area, after a sudden and wide-spread failure about 25 years ago the species has not only been unable to regain any of the lost ground, but has further declined.